

# More bodies there

## Thai villagers suspect

STAR REPORT

Villagers in the southern Thai district of Sadao claim there are other camps of trafficking victims in the jungle where more bodies, other than 26 exhumed on Friday and Saturday, could be found.

"There could be more than 50 graves at the second camp and there are other camps with smaller numbers of buried bodies," reports news portal Phuketwan quoting a source.

Anuzar, one of the two survivors rescued from the camp on Friday, said there could be at least 10 Bangladeshis among the 26 exhumed.

"Eight brokers controlled the camp," Anuzar said. "I knew three well -- Ahmed Ali, Anwar and Sorim-Ida. Some are Rohingya and some are Malaysians."

Bangladesh Ambassador to Thailand Saida Muna Tasneem said they had no information on the identities of the bodies exhumed. They were trying to have access to the survivor, identified by police as a Bangladeshi, she added.

She further said 1,200 Bangladeshis had been rescued by the Thai authorities in last one and a half years and some 850 were repatriated.

Referring to the survivors, the Bangkok Post said at least 800 refugees were being held in the camp prior to its discovery by the authorities.

They said the prisoners had been dispersed shortly before officers moved in on Friday.

The Thai authorities have meanwhile formed a special police team to investigate human trafficking in southern Thailand.

The Phuketwan reports that discovery of the bodies is a legacy of years of human trafficking, with local villagers in southern Thailand and along the Andaman coast either benefiting from the horrendous trade in people or turning a blind eye to it.

The authorities wishing to trap the traffickers have seldom had much success because vast networks of accomplices always issue warnings when raids are undertaken.

The raiders almost every time found groups of lame Rohingya and Bangladeshi boatpeople, too sick or injured to travel, in the discarded jungle camps.

The news portal says many more graves exist at hidden camps across the south and north of Phuket along the Andaman coast in Phang Nga and Ranong where boats from Myanmar and Bangladesh have been delivering men, women and children to so-called "brokers" for years.



Rescue workers dig as human remains are retrieved from a mass grave at an abandoned camp in a jungle some 300 metres from the border with Malaysia, in Thailand's Songkhla province on Saturday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# 3,700 migrants rescued at sea

BBC ONLINE

Nearly 3,700 migrants were rescued from boats near the coast of Libya on Saturday and early yesterday, the Italian coastguard said.

A spokesman said rescue operations were likely to continue throughout yesterday. All of those pulled from boats were being taken to Italy.

Italian authorities said the migrants were rescued by Italian and French navy vessels in 17 separate operations.

At least 1,750 people have died this year trying to cross the Mediterranean.

The number is a 20-fold increase on the same period in 2014, when 96 people died. Many more migrants are expected to make the crossing as smugglers take advantage of calmer weather.

At an emergency meeting last

month to discuss the crisis, European Union leaders said they would triple the funding for rescue operations run by EU border agency Frontex, and threatened to target smugglers' boats with military strikes.

Italy abandoned its Mare Nostrum search-and-rescue mission last year after some EU members - including the UK - said they could not afford to fund it.

The decision was widely criticised in April after more than 800 people died when a single boat sank - the deadliest capsizing recorded in the Mediterranean.

Some of the 27 survivors of the accident described being beaten by smugglers in an attempt to load more migrants on to the boat.

The overloaded vessel crashed into a cargo ship shortly after leaving Libya, causing panic on board. The dead were mostly Syrians, Eritreans, and Somalis - adults and children.

# 2 Biman staff held with 40 gold bars

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cg

Customs Intelligence officials yesterday arrested two Biman staff along with 40 gold bars, weighing around 4.64 kilograms, at Shah Amanat International Airport in the port city.

The arrestees, Belal Hossain and Sheikh Kamal, are traffic helpers of Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

Around 9:30am, the gold bars were brought to the airport from the United Arab Emirates by a Fly Dubai flight passenger. The gold bars were handed over to the Biman staff at the conveyor belt to get it out of the airport later, said Customs Intelligence sources.

Acting on a tip-off, Customs Intelligence officials searched Belal and Kamal and seized the gold bars, concealed inside two packets of cigarettes, from their possession, said Syed Mukaddes Hossain, assistant director of Chittagong Customs Intelligence and Investigation Directorate.

He said they had increased surveillance at the airport on information that some government agencies' staff were involved in gold smuggling.

The arrestees would be interrogated, Mukaddes said.

The value of the seized gold bars was estimated at around Tk 2.30 crore, he added. A case was filed.

# Avijit killing

FROM PAGE 1

Bangladesh-born US citizen Avijit Roy was hacked to death on the Dhaka University campus on February 26 while returning from Ekushey Book Fair with his wife Rafida Ahmed Banna, who was also badly injured in the attack.

Hours after the killing, its responsibility was claimed from a twitter profile named Ansar Bangla-7.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, DMP Joint Commissioner Monirul Islam, who is leading the murder probe, said they were studying the AQIS claim.

During their probe into the Avijit murder, he said, they had found involvement of a rising militant outfit called Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT).

Monirul said ABT and Ansar Bangla-7 are actually the same organisation. And of all the militant groups in Bangladesh, ABT is the "closest relative" of al-Qaeda.

The official earlier had said ABT followed the ideologies and organisational structure of al-Qaeda to become an affiliate of the global terror organisation.

In September last year, al-Qaeda launched a new branch to "wage jihad" in South Asia to invigorate its waning Islamist extremist movement.

A-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri then said the new chapter would take the

fight to Myanmar, Bangladesh and India.

Rab's Intelligence Wing Director Lt Col Abul Kalam Azad told The Daily Star that they are verifying the AQIS claim, but there was no doubt that religious extremists had killed Avijit Roy.

Asked whether al-Qaeda has any organisational activities in Bangladesh, Rab's Intelligence Wing Director Lt Col Abul Kalam Azad, refused to make any comment.

Mufti Mahmud Khan, director at the Rab's legal and media wing, too said it couldn't be certain the claim was correct.

"We are not sure," Mufti Mahmud told AFP when asked if Al Qaeda was behind the deaths of Avijit and two other bloggers -- Ahmed Rajib Haider and Oyasiquur Rahman Babu.

The attack on Avijit was strikingly similar to that on two other bloggers -- Ahmed Rajib Haider and Oyasiquur Rahman Babu. All three were hacked to death by machete-wielding attackers, and their writings had angered Islamist fundamentalists.

After the 2013 murder of Rajib, seven ABT members were arrested and they confessed to the killing.

In March this year, two madrasa students were caught soon after the killing of Oyasiquur. Police are now probing if the duo had any links to the attack on Avijit.

FROM PAGE 1

Earlier in September, a group of 37 people, also reportedly Bangladeshi, were rescued from the jungle.

All this exposes how a modern-day slave trade has taken a firm root in Bangladesh and also in this region. Beaten, abused and left with no food, these wretched men tell a horrific tale of how they were abducted in the style of the 17th century slave trade in Africa and forced to work in the plantation in hazardous conditions.

**THE LUCRATIVE BUSINESS**  
According to the broker in Malaysia, traffickers' agents spread across Bangladesh get between Tk 5,000 and 10,000 for each person supplied to the chain, and the godfathers in Cox's Bazar pocket between Tk 15,000 and 30,000.

The jobseekers are not released from the Thai jungles until their Thai captors get confirmation from the traffickers in Bangladesh that they received ransom from the victims' families. The amount varies, but it is usually between Tk 2 lakh and 3.5 lakh per victim.

Much of the ransom is transacted through mobile banking, and the traffickers and their brokers have underhand dealings with local agents of various mobile banking services.

Under pressure from the traffickers to pay the ransom by the deadline, helpless families sell their last pieces of land, often their homesteads, or take loans from local lenders at high interest rates.

Information on the trade and its size is hard to come by due to its clandestine nature. But victims and NGOs working on the issue say the network is spread over Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia.

According to a UN report released in December last year, about 53,000 people from Bangladesh and Myanmar voyaged to Malaysia and Thailand by sea that year alone.

Estimates by local and international NGOs are based on secondary sources, mainly media reports, and do not reflect the true magnitude of the problem.

In November last year, this newspaper interviewed eight trafficked victims at home and in Malaysia, six union

chairmen of Cox's Bazar's coastal area and several rights activists to get an idea of the trade.

The figures they gave are staggering: At least two cargo vessels, each carrying about 500 people, leave Bangladesh territory from about 20 nautical miles southeast of the St Martin's Island every week, eight months a year. Usually, the business is down in June-September because of rain and turbulent sea.

This means some 4,000 people are trafficked every month or about 32,000 a year. And if Tk 2 lakh ransom were realised from each of them, the amount would stand at Tk 64 crore.

But not all the victims' families can pay ransom. The victims interviewed said some fail to arrange the money, and many of them are sold as slaves.

That people are sold as slaves in Thailand even to this day comes as no surprise. In 2013, the Guardian reported how the over 7-billion worth Thai seafood industry is built on slave labour, as "ghost ships" reach the Thai shore along the Andaman Sea from northeastern direction (Bangladesh-Myanmar).

The British newspaper found one can get a slave for around £250 in Thailand, while Reuters news agency put the price between \$155 and \$1,550.

"I believe the actual number of people migrating through the route will exceed the estimate [by The Daily Star]," said Teknaf's Katabuniya UP Chairman Hamidur Rahman.

From 2011 to 2013, between 50,000 and 1,00,000 jobseekers made the voyage through the Reju canal estuary point alone, said Abul Kashem, executive director of Help, an Ukhia-based NGO.

The Daily Star's estimate of 2.5 lakh Bangladeshis being trafficked over the last eight years is based on information given by victims and rights activists, and is therefore not definitive. It is rather a conservative estimate. And the calculation was done for the past eight years because we could trace back victims of only thus far.

Of the estimated victims, 10 to 15 percent are Rohingyas, according to Teknaf and Ukhia police.

# 500 killed in camps

FROM PAGE 1

site in Songkhla's Sadao district.

A migrant who escaped that tragic fate has told police he saw a trafficker named Arnua and his henchmen beat Kazim to death. Speaking via an interpreter on condition of anonymity, this survivor said he had heard that more than 500 victims were killed at various camps holding human-trafficking or kidnap victims along the Thai-Malaysian borders.

"I've also heard that thousands of Rohingyas migrants were at those camps waiting for promised jobs or for ransom to arrive," he said.

This survivor said he was lured out of Myanmar's Rakhine state six months ago by an offer to find him a job in Malaysia. He ended up in the same camp as Kazim, where between 700 and 800 migrants were held.

"My mum had to sell our family's land to pay for my ransom. That's why I am still safe," he said.

Kuramia said when Arnua first contacted him, he agreed to pay Bt95,000 ransom in exchange for Kazim's freedom.

"But after I transferred the money,

he went quiet. Then about 15 days later, he asked for Bt120,000 more," Kuramia lamented.

He said as he did not have any more money, he decided to lodge a complaint with police in Thailand's Nakhon Si Thammarat province.

Kuramia said he was told later that after he made the complaint, Arnua and his henchmen had bludgeoned Kazim to death.

Because the survivor had come forward to testify as a witness, police issued an arrest warrant for Arnua who was then taken into custody.

Further investigation into the case led to the campsite in Sadao, and also to the mass gravesite where many corpses were uncovered.

The survivor from the camp said that during his time there, between 17 and 20 people were killed.

"They were either shot or clubbed to death," he said.

He said victims whose relatives could not afford the ransom would be fatally attacked or left to die.

Assistant National Police Commissioner General Jaruporn Suramaneey yesterday said most bodies

THAI COMPLICITY?

Those who returned home after rescue cannot give any name, but say the trade is controlled by several organised rings.

Jewel Barua, 22, is one of those rescued by the Thai police from a jungle in January last year. He had been abducted and shipped to the country in November 2013.

In the jungle he was held, he saw a woman-only group running the business. The leader of the group was called "Kaka Rani and looked like a Thai national".

Matthew Smith, executive director of Fortify Rights, Thailand, said there were tens of thousands of people in this predicament, being beaten and tortured for ransom, whether at sea, in jungle camps, or in other holding areas in Malaysia.

"In some cases, Thai authorities have been complicit in human trafficking, selling detainees to criminal syndicates, who then bring them to traffickers' camps," he told this paper in an email late last year.

In January this year, Thai authorities confirmed more than a dozen government officials, including senior policemen and a navy officer, were being tried for involvement or complicity in human trafficking.

On the Bangladesh side, Teknaf and St Martin's Island are at the heart of the trade. After arriving from different districts of the country, fortune seekers are kept in houses along the Teknaf coast and robbed of all their belongings, even their sandals. On the fixed dates, they are walked to the boats by the brokers' assistants, who are usually local people.

Captains of most of these vessels are Thai nationals. Once taken to Thai coast, the victims are separated into groups named after the godfathers in Teknaf and Cox's Bazar who send them.

"VEGETABLES"  
In clearings cut out in parts of the dense Thai jungles, traffickers set up numerous tarpaulin tents for the jobseekers, who are shifted from one place to another for security reasons and to facilitate intrusion into Malaysia.

The shifting requires hours of jour-

ney in pickup-style roofless vehicles. On its open back are placed 20 migrants, who are then wrapped up by a porous plastic sheet.

On the way, whenever asked, presumably by police, what was being carried under the sheet, Jewel Barua heard his captors say: "Vegetables."

In addition to those held captive in jungles, there are reserve supplies of migrants in the bushes atop Thai hills and islands along the coast and also in cruising ships moored in the Andaman Sea, according to victims and brokers.

The reserve is for backups, in case of a supply of migrants getting caught by cops.

FROM A FREE MAN TO A SLAVE

There are diverse ways to intrude into Malaysia from Thailand. Youths from a Thai clan called Shan are used in pushing migrants into Malaysian territory by cutting fences.

Anis, a victim, had to run for about five minutes through a field to cross the border. There were several women and kids in their group of 42.

Before and after crossing over to Malaysia, the Pabna man met people working in houses along borders of both the countries for no pay, as they failed to pay ransom.

Anis was lucky. He paid the money while in Thailand, and his elder brother, who was already in Malaysia, picked him up from the border dotted with houses, known as "receive houses," built for keeping trafficking victims.

The rest of the victims were sent to these houses. There, a man named Nazrul Islam was sold by the traffickers to a Malaysian construction supervisor, although he paid Tk 1.8 lakh in ransom. Once a freeman however poor, he is a slave now.

It is hard to tell what happened to the rest of the group. As for Anis, he now works as a cleaner in Malaysia -- job his brother has found for him.

"It is a myth that traffickers will arrange jobs for trafficking victims," said Nazrul by phone.

"People are still being lured into the voyage," he said, adding: "Maybe some trafficking victims are boarding a cargo vessel right at this moment somewhere in the wide, wide Bangladesh sea."

According to the survivor who was a witness in Kazim's case, a Thai couple known only as Bang Chee and Farida owned the camp in which he and Kazim had been held.

"They came to the camp to check the number of victims and the amount of ransom," the survivor said.

Meanwhile, police in Tak province are trying to locate two Myanmar females reportedly lured to the Thai side and held at a plantation in Ban Huai Nok Lae.

The victims, aged 13 and 25, only contacted their family once since leaving their border village with a man last week. Their family has told authorities that this man was very likely a human trafficker.

Deputy Government Spokesman Sansern Kaewkamnerd said Prime Minister Prayut would order tough punishment for officials involved in the human trafficking of Rohingyas. Article 44 of the interim charter might be enforced if the premier deemed it necessary, he said.

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